

NOTHING BUT ME: A STUDY OF IDENTITY THROUGH
CHOREOGRAPHY, PERFORMANCE,
AND EDUCATION

by

Kelly M. Bruce

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The thesis of _____ **Kelly M. Bruce** _____

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

_____**Juan Carlos Claudio**_____, Chair 4/23/2015
Date Approved

_____**Donna White**_____, Member 4/23/2015
Date Approved

_____**Sharee Lane**_____, Member 4/23/2015
Date Approved

and by _____ **Stephen Koester** _____, Chair/Dean of

the Department/College/School of _____ **Modern Dance** _____

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

Identity is one way in which we claim ourselves and our role within society. It allows us to categorize and negotiate who we are within this world, simultaneously altering who we become. How attached and attuned to ourselves can we be when our identity is heavily shaped and informed by our culture and surroundings? Due to this lack of attachment to identity, artists and dancers are faced with the problem of losing their own voices within the art of performance and choreography. Losing one's 'artistic' voice takes away a key layer in the multidimensionality present in the art of performance and choreography. Through my research, I question if a better understanding of one's self-identity can cultivate a more trusted and impactful way of moving, performing, and creating. In my research, I question whether I can recognize one of the many aspects of our identity that feels more honest to myself. This recognition through dance can result in a new aesthetic and intention of moving and educating. This thesis will investigate the process of creating work and teaching from a place of self-recognition while using an understanding of one's identity, past history, and memories to create new potential possibilities within performance and the classroom.

The value of identity of course is that so often with it comes purpose.
~Richard Grant

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CHAPTER I

FORMATION AND FOUNDATION

In this thesis, I researched how understanding my identity might allow for me, as a performer, choreographer, and educator, to cultivate a more authentic and impactful way of creating work and teaching. Identity is a term that can be understood and addressed through a variety of definitions and contexts, but I was interested in how I could find a deeper understanding of and attunement with my identity in the context of movement, choreography, and teaching. As I started to work more in depth as a choreographer, performer, and educator in my graduate studies, I found that I lost sight of the process and began to place more value on the product of the work being made, inherently losing my voice or identity in the process. This lack of connection to myself and my intent as a dance artist and educator entrapped and caged me in a specific role that I wanted to have stripped away. This stripping away invariably led to an even deeper disconnect between my identity and my body as a whole, but simultaneously, this process of letting go of what was familiar to me also allowed me to begin to understand this disconnection. It created a desire to research the role of my changing identity, and what it might have in the creative work I was doing for my thesis, and the role that process will have in my future endeavors. These personal experiences led me to a larger question about the ability of artists and educators, in general, to hold on to their senses of identity

while choreographing, performing, and teaching. I question if, in these roles, I, as well as others, can learn to let go of what we have come to believe our identities are in order to take more risks and grow as artists, performers, and educators.

As a result of my research, I have a better understanding of my identity and, simultaneously, I found that allowing my dancers, my middle school students, and myself to honor our voices in the creative process opened up possibilities for a more organic and authentic way of moving, teaching, and creating. This process, of finding a way to work from a place of one's more authentic identity, now allows for my creative work and teaching to stem from a place of deeper exploration and honesty. These new possibilities and perspectives now lead me to feel and create from a more mature and empowered place.

In this thesis, I use the term identity in a particular way to discuss and find meaning in the choreographic, performance, and educational process. The term identity holds many meanings, definitions, and understanding to many people around the world. Recently identity has taken on new meaning in our culture and stands at the forefront of political, social, and cultural politics. I am not supplying a concrete definition; however, I will discuss some definitions that inform the way I examine identity through this thesis. Hoggs and Abraham define identity as, "people's concepts of which they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (as cited in Fearon, 1999, p. 4). This definition plays a primary role for me in the process of creating my thesis piece, *My head, My hands*. It leads me to recognize and find the importance of choreographing from a place that honors and trusts who and what I identify with. I further recognize that in my process, I must look at both my past and present-day existence. I believe that my own

identity can also contain the many influences that exist in my surroundings. Therefore, I also find a connection with and understanding of identity as stated in Deng, "... the way individuals and groups define them-selves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture" (as cited in Fearon, 1999, p. 5). In my work, I use these two sources and synthesize them to form my own definition of identity: a way in which I recognize who I am, how I relate to others, and the way in which I define myself in society. This definition provides space for me to create a personal connection and understanding of my body and myself by making room for the people, places, and things that surround me. Identity also allows for me to recognize and associate similarities and differences in relation to the rest of the world. On a larger societal level, I believe identity allows us, as a society, to feel a sense of belonging and community, giving us the opportunity to identify with people from all over our region and even globally. Yet, at the same time, we need to find space to find acceptance and understanding of others identities and cultures that differ from ours. This sense of community is the main contributing factor to why I chose to work with the dancers in my thesis piece as collaborators.

In Chapter I, I provide an overview of my ideas and map out the trajectory of my research through this thesis process.

In Chapter II, I discuss how my own history, memory, and experience shapes my identity. This chapter discusses how my current acceptance and deeper awareness of my identity shifts the way in which I make work, perform, and approach pedagogy.

Chapter III discusses many theories of identity and their connection to my mental and physical body through the art of performance and choreography. I look at a variety of

artists, choreographers, and theorists to investigate how others come to form their identities and what the roles of those identities are within their choreography and performance.

Chapter IV discusses my work as a choreographer, that reinforce my ideas on identity and its connectedness to the body. The chapter also analyzes how I found a way to honor and create space for my own identity through the creation of *My head, My hands*. I address the ideas and methods I use to create the structure of the work, the final performances, and provide an overall look for the final product.

Chapter V addresses my time as an educator with middle school students and how this research began to reach beyond the stage and into the classroom. I further discuss how I began the process of integrating my research on identity into the classroom. This chapter explores the hardships and successes for students as they attempted to uncover a deeper understanding of themselves as young adults. I also address my perspectives as an educator and mentor attempting to use dance as an in-road for middle school students to recognize and understand their identities on a deeper level. I hope to show that this process can begin to help change and shape the face of learning and education.

In conclusion, Chapter VI summarizes the results of my research and provides a window into the impact of identity in art making, performing, and educating. It discusses the future of this research through additional performances and the potential for change and transformation in approaches to performing, creating, and educating. The outcomes of my research provides information and ideas for others on the importance of understanding and embracing self-identity as choreographers, performers, and educators.

CHAPTER II

ME, MYSELF, AND I

My research began from feeling that my body (both mind and body) was transforming with my time in graduate school. I felt for the first time I was no longer enacting identities that others had placed on me, but rather I was starting to embody the things I inwardly felt and believed to be true. I found an acceptance and understanding of my ever-evolving and multifaceted body as I dug deeper into the art of dance. My graduate career provided a space for me to investigate and explore in a way that was open. I was consistently asked to dig deeper, investigate further, and question everything I was putting forth. Through this intensive exploration, I found something deep within myself that had been suppressed for many years. I finally felt free to explore and express myself from a place that ultimately felt truer and more honest to who I was in the past and present. This liberation came through the art of dance, specifically through the process of choreography, performing, and teaching. It was the genesis of my question, “How could I integrate these discoveries into my performance, choreography, and teaching?”

I believe this research, although not fully realized, was a part of me from the beginning. I constantly questioned if I would ever fit into what society had taught me to

do, and if I was like everyone else. In graduate school, I continued to feel pressured to put on a show, until one day, I could no longer recognize or find where the true “me” resided. Even in a place that I felt most comfortable, the dance studio began to feel foreign as I lost sight of my inner voice. In my training up until this time, I was taught and eventually believed that in order to be a professional dancer, I had to perform tricks that often felt fake. These performances for me never came from a place of expressing something that felt true to who I was. It became more about showing off technical feats on stage, which lacked a connection to my history and lived experience. I kept questioning these practices throughout my training, never quite understanding what was missing. Once I realized my disconnection to my body, I could hardly understand how I spent so much time trapped due to the lack of understanding and awareness of some of the many aspects of identity.

One piece opened my eyes to how I could use this connection within the art of dance. This piece was a catalyst for this project that was choreographed by Lynn Bobzin. Bobzin’s choreography *To Plead to the Mercy of all things* pushed me to navigate the depths of my own identity. Bobzin and I had begun creating this piece with the intention of revealing who I was as I concluded my first year in Utah. I had recently left everything I knew from home and headed over a thousand miles away for graduate school. It was only in the privacy of my close friendship with Bobzin that I was comfortable enough to reveal my true inner-self. This piece was a way that pushed my limits and broke down my social walls. Bobzin was very clear in wanting to create a piece that recognized me and my identity. Her choreographic process transformed me and jump-started my research into identity. The process was physically and psychologically grueling. I would often leave rehearsals confused, overwhelmed, and overcome by emotions. I felt lost

within the process and frequently wanted to give up. Through this process, I felt the ability to be pushed out of my comfort zone. However, the performance enabled me to find something unlike anything I had experienced before. I no longer felt the need to play a part on stage. Instead, I felt a certain comfort in exposing my many facets of me. I was able to feel comfortable in a place that is wild, emotional, and unacceptable at times within society. Reflecting on the experience, I realized that the emotions were not about the physical demand of my body, but rather the experience I accessed and found connections to who I was/am. I now understand that I spent years suppressing my instincts and sense of self in order to gain the acceptance of my colleagues and peers. This performance and choreographic process broke the chains of suppression and allowed me to feel free and comfortable within my own skin.

Allowing myself to work from a place of more attention and awareness, I had begun to watch my experience as a performer, choreographer, and educator change. There was something about the way it felt and looked that became hard to place in words. I started this thesis with the intention to create and move from a place that is a more honest expression of my dancers' and my own inner selves. This research then granted me the ability that allowed me to discover other artist, theorist, and dance scholars who are also interested in this research along with finding a better way of creating, performing, and teaching.

CHAPTER III

THE THEORY OF...

Through my thesis research, which was focused on the role of self-identity in the creative process, I worked to find a more authentic and impactful way of moving and creating. It was not a formula I was seeking and I cannot say that what I discovered would be true for others, but I did unearth and honor more facets of my identity as a person, performer, choreographer, and educator than I had previously experienced. My research has led me to look into the works of various choreographers, dancers, and scholars, in addition to my own experiences. This research helped uncover my own ideas and theories on identity, which resulted in the creation of my graduate thesis work *My head, My hands*.

In this theoretical section of my document, I begin by exploring identity as an abstract concept, one that is socially and culturally constructed with many facets and layers. I follow this by investigating a series of choreographers whom I believe have successfully found a connection between identity and the art of choreography. Using my research on these choreographers, as well as the findings of dance scholars, I go on to posit a few areas of the choreographic process that can allow for an enhanced connection with identity. I continue this section by linking these findings to my own choreographic

process for *My head, My hands*.

Although we have narrowed down our definition of identity for the purposes of this thesis, the reality is that identity is abstract and deep in nature. Fearon (1999) puts forth 14 distinct definitions for “identity” in his paper on the complexities and difficulties with defining the term. Furthermore, Gomzina states that “identity is like a core of an individual and the core can be neither seen nor stated at once because it does not lie on the surface” (Gomzina, 2012, p. 19). Just because this core cannot be seen nor heard does not mean it is any less present in our lives. Identity, as a concept, is a paradox. It is always there, and yet we always struggle to access and understand it. Self-identity is always evolving as impacted by our genetic make-up as well as all kinds of outside influences.

I believe that through my own experiences as a choreographer as well as the research from other choreographers and theorist that movement is the best medium to increase awareness to access to a deeper understanding, and connection to our identities. Sheets-Johnstone (1999), a dance scholar and professor at the University of Oregon, discusses “... that humans learn about themselves and others initially through moving, by attending to bodily sensations of movement, rather than by looking and seeing what is moving” (Barbour, 2011, p. 66). This creates evidence for why choreography and performance through the art of dance is the perfect medium for identity development, understanding, and awareness. These findings create space and opportunity for my research to continue to flourish and find growth amongst the dance community. It also opens up new choreographic approaches to choreographers and dancers looking to access a deeper level of identity awareness in their dancing.

Any study into accessing identity should include an investigation into the multifaceted roots into the formation of identity. There are many different dimensions and aspects of identity that include biological, psychological, and social/cultural layers (Gomzina, 2011, p. 22). It is a formation that draws from our past, present, and future selves. It infiltrates its way into all of our many experiences that creates one holistic being. It begins at birth and continues to change each day as we grow and develop over time. I have found these ideas to be true through watching my own identity develop over time. In *Dancing Across the Page*, Karen Barbour writes, “My body is continually in the process of being shaped by social practices and is, at the same time, the means by which I am able to express my resistance to socio-cultural and bodily norms. I can creatively adopt positions in the world and function interactively” (Barbour, 2001, p. 64). I have experienced this series of processes and adaptations in my own identity. My past allows me to identify and find connection in a strong southern tradition based on my heritage and family lineage. However, my inherently rebellious nature, that I have recently come to accept or embrace, is one part of my identity that has been with me biologically, it seems as if forever. It is something that has run through my veins since I can remember. At times, I have felt the need to repress or quiet this side of me, only for it to reemerge again. For me, this continues to provide proof through my own body how complex and layered identity always can and will be.

We seem to continue to look for answers related to identity development through our DNA, brain development, and genetic make up. Scientist have concluded that, “Genetic die are cast at conception, and after the bulk of the neural scaffolding is laid down in early life, the brain maintains a trickle of raw potential through its ability to

grow a limited number of new neurons” (Castro, 2013). These neurons are what allow the body to adapt and change as we continue to grow and mature into adulthood. What this provides for our research is evidence within the body that we are born consisting of a genetic identity, but shortly after birth, this “cast” begins evolving over time.

Pina Bausch is a choreographer who has attempted to connect with her own identity and the identities of her performers throughout her career. In her article “Pina,” Susan Broadhurst discusses Bausch’s relationship with identity: “Dance was a way (for Bausch) to explore and discover new parameters of embodiment and identity. In her choreography, familiar relations of the physical body were frequently dislocated in time and space, destabilizing notions of any fixed identity” (Broadhurst, 2012, p. 91). Bausch used the destabilization and deconstruction of identity to help her access embodiment. Although my research was not about destabilizing practices, our main objectives were similar. Bausch also focused mainly on gender identity, whereas I am interested in identity as a whole. Regardless of these differences, Bausch’s process and approach to dance is extremely relevant to my research on dance and identity. Bausch also very frequently worked from her past experiences and history. Bausch grew up as a child in Solingen, Germany, which suffered frequent air raids resulting in her moving to Wuppertal for a brief time. She moved to New York to continue her studies in dance and eventually created her internationally recognized company *Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch*. In *What Moves Me*, Bausch says, “Much of what I experienced as a child takes place again much later on the stage” (Bausch, 2007). She goes on to discuss how her childhood memories were “unforgettable,” page #8. Her recollections of her childhood memories throughout the interview were incredibly in-depth and vivid. I believe that her

detailed recollections resulted in her allowing for her work to create space for these memories to exist. She admits to these ideas driving her choreographic work, and this is what I believe has added to her success as a dance artist. She allowed room for her dancers and herself as a choreographer to use the medium of dance as a way to access and deepen her awareness of her history. She kept her inner sense of self as an integral part of her work, which very much included her past, present, and future.

I believe we currently have a lack of opportunity or place for the explorations of identity within this form and many others. I have recognized through my experiences growing into adulthood, that within classrooms, homes, jobs, and society, we are often asked to produce a product without ever placing emphasis on the process. We are not asked to explore how or why we got the answer and what our personal role played in the final product. Rather, we are asked to be removed from the experience and robotically manufacture quality products. This is one reason why I have chosen identity paired with the art of choreography, performance, and education as a research topic. Through this process, I am allowed to analyze and create room for exploration of oneself in the process, without placing emphasis on the product. Bausch discusses similar exploration on how dance gives us this space and forum by saying, “The fantastic possibility we have on stage is that we might be able to do things that one is not allowed to do or cannot do in normal life” (Broadhurst, 2012, p. 160).

Bausch often used expression-based techniques that began to unveil more about her and her dancers in the art-making process. Larry Lavender Predock-Linnell and Jennifer Predock-Linnell discuss the unique benefits of expression-based prompts, “Expression-based prompts...invite students to delve into their memories, beliefs, hopes,

fears, and dreams and then to generate simple movement sequences, or even whole dances, that symbolize or represent these facets of the students' unique identities" (L. Predock-Linnell & J. Predock-Linnell, 2011, p. 196). One expression-based process she used and crafted over the years is a series of questions and answers that "...asks her dancers to enact a mood or desire, and, from their responses, she builds a collage" (Basuch, 2012). Although these questions are different, I used a similar process in creating *My head, My hands* which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2. Rather than looking for answers, I allowed my dancers to complete a statement in a variety of different responses. This created nearly endless opportunities to find answers that felt right for each day in the process. We, as Bausch also did, were able to then translate these answer or responses into movement creating a larger piece. The question I used throughout my process was simple, yet complex. I asked dancers each rehearsal to respond and create choreography based off of the sentence "I am..." Bausch used specific questions such as:

Copy someone else's tic.

Do something you are ashamed of.

Write your name with movement.

What would you do with a corpse?

Move your favorite body part.

How do you behave when you've lost something? (Bausch, 2012)

Although each process was different in many ways, I believe we were both searching for a deeper connection to the movement and identities of both dancers and choreographers. There are many other choreographers who build movement from the many facets of their

identities, including Marie Chouinard, Vincent Manstoe, and Marisa Canesky. Canesky and Manstoe focus on our past history. “Canesky presents live(d) bodies that are bound up with history just as they are continuously of the performing moment (Broadhurst, 2012, p. 123). Manstoe channels his own experience and cultural background in his work that is described as a combination of “...entertainment, history, and spirituality” (as cited in Dance Magazine). We continue to take a deeper look in choreographing from a place that honors our memories, past history, and experience.

I continued my research to find effective choreographic strategies that ~~can~~ allow for a strong connection to identity. Amongst these were methods of improvisation and collaboration. Improvisation was one of the most useful tools in my process. “Improvisational practice explores awareness of the body, conceptualization, and how both are integrated in an embodied, emergent process” (Bucksbarg & Carter, 2012, p. 9). One aspect of improvisation that allows for this exploration is the opportunity for discovery. This provides dancers with the ability to dig past the surface level and reach the inner depths of the self. There is an unconscious level of the body that improvisation helps us reach; it is at this level where we find the facets of our identity that we store away or ignore in daily life. “Moreover, the practice of improvisation is assumed to put students in touch with their authentic selves, and help them to find their unique artistic identities” (L. Predock-Linnell & J. Predock-Linnell, 2011). Another key benefit in improvisational practice is space for change and evolution. As we have discussed, our identities are not inert. They change, adapt, and assimilate. Thus, the route for accessing identity should be similarly malleable and flexible in nature. The use of improvisation was a helpful method in crafting my own choreography for *My head, My hands*. Some of

the initial improvisations became choreography, while others remained as improvisational scores. This gave my dancers the freedom and liberty to listen and respond to their bodies and identities for each showing and performance. Collaboration is another important tool that can be useful in accessing the many facets of our identity.

Our understanding and deeper awareness does not emerge solely from self-reflection, but comes from finding a sense of identity within a community. “An individual’s embodied discoveries or achievements cannot be readily verified or discursively celebrated without the assistance of knowing witnesses. Nor can embodied selves be easily generated or sustained in sport or dance without the presence and assistance of co participants” (Archetti & Dyck, 2003, p. 11). I believe collaboration plays an essential role in this process by asking us as choreographers and performers to analyze and reflect on how our identities fit into the larger scheme of our surrounding community. Simultaneously, we begin to create support and comfort amongst this community to find encouragement in the art-making process. This gives us the ability to explore in a place that seems at times vulnerable and unstable. Creating my graduate thesis piece was a collaborative experience for my dancers, committee members, mentors, and myself. In *My head, My hands*, it was essential to build a piece of choreography together that not only spoke about us as individuals, but also us as a community.

I believe that accessing the identities of both choreographers and performers in movement can result in a more trusted and authentic way of moving. Karen Nicole Barbour writes, “I shifted away from thinking about the body as a text and as language as a metaphor for everything (as expressed in a range of post-structural and postmodern

positions), and towards privileging experience and ‘embodiment’” (Barbour, 2011, p. 64). By accessing identity in these processes, this embodied way of moving becomes a possibility. This connection to a deeper element rather than relying on perception or “body as text” we are able to reach a deeper understanding of our own bodies.

CHAPTER IV

MY HEAD, MY HANDS

My head, My hands was a trio performed at the graduate thesis concert “The Theory of...” December 5, 6, and 7 at the Marriot Center for Dance that was created from a variety of improvisational suggestions and prompts that honored the artistic and personal voices of both me as the choreographer and the performers. We began the creative journey by creating lists entitled “I am.” The lists were structured as prompts, asking the dancers and myself to complete phrase “I am...” For example, one may have written, “I am a Southern Belle.” “I am a woman.” “I am a daughter.” “I am an Artist.” Each list began with a similar set of identifying roles for the dancers and myself (i.e., woman, dancer, artist, daughter, etc.). As the dancers and I continued to write and respond, we began to uncover more complex facets within ourselves. This allowed us to give more thought to the complicated roots of identity and the influence of our environments. The list morphed into a physical image of our multidimensional identities and served as a way to investigate and find attunement with our past, present, and future bodies.

Although we wrote these lists during our first rehearsal, we had the opportunity to add, edit, or delete our responses going forward. The lists were ever changing, and

provided more information and guidance each day as we started to craft the piece. We would utilize the prompts to explore these notions of identity through improvisational scores. Within the creative process, the scores were my way to generate movement in collaboration with the dancers. We then used the movement as a mechanism to express the words and meanings in our lists. While the dancers found they would often share words on their lists, each word was significant in distinct ways for each individual. These similarities and differences resulted in interesting dynamics and effort qualities within their movement choices. The dancer's solo reflected the complexities and nuances of their lists, their words, and most importantly for my research, their identities.

The dancers began creating what became movement "signatures" for themselves and the qualities that came through those signatures became very unique to each individual, and the story she wanted to tell. Solo one was comprised of qualities that were jolted with the hint of fluidity. The dancer's physicality and strength in each movement created an atmosphere that embodied both tension and mystique. This solo brought an overwhelming sense of slashing, loud, and abrupt movement to the space. It bound the energy in the space and then created an explosive atmosphere. Solo two imprinted the space with its energy and extreme movement. At times, it was frantic and chaotic. This shift in quality created the opportunity for solo three to possess an intense quality paired with fragility and lightness. That solo for me came from a perspective that began to comment on soloist three as a woman and the strength yet fragility that title held. Soloist three kept building in energy and intensity throughout, resulting in soloist three collapsing to the floor. Each solo possessed such unique energy qualities that captured the contrasts and many facets in the identities of the three dancers.

Once we created these scores, we went through a detailed process of showing, editing, and re-investigating. This process allowed for a deeper connection with the movement material and text. Each time we returned to the lists and scores investigating and finding deeper relationships and connections, I recognized a difference between the intention of the dancers and their relationship to their choreography.

Observing these deeper connections with my dancers' performances brought back a sensation I experienced while watching an evening length performance of two solos by Vincent Mantsoe and Yin Mei at Bates Dance Festival. Something about watching my dancers and reconnecting with Mantsoe and Mei's solo created excitement and intrigue. Researching these solos from Mantsoe and Yin Mei, I realized that both solos stemmed from an honest place in those dancers' histories, memories, and past experiences.

Mantsoe is a performer and choreographer from Soweto South Africa. He uses his traditions and contemporary ideas to create his work. He often discusses "honoring his ancestors" within his work, which I believe created my excitement and interest in his work (Mantsoe, 2011). His work seemed to come from a place that honored his past, while still creating room for his present self. His attention to his traditions and customs within which he grew up provided a different and unique relationship to the movement. I too was interested in this honoring of my dancers and my own past history through my creative process. This deep connection I experienced from both soloist at Bates Dance Festival and now with my dancers provided an experience that I continue to struggle to wrap words around due to that fact that these qualities were in the moment. It was a performance for me that transported me to a different realm.

However, these questions are ideas that I have pondered for a long time as I

continued to grow up in a place that often felt limiting for me as an artist and person. I discussed in Chapter II how I was often changing who I was and being someone different than what I actually felt. I spoke about how at a young age, I realized that the personal beliefs of those around me did not align with my own. This resulted in me spending most of my young adulthood feeling like I must quiet my identity not just as a community member, but also as an artist. My identity has shifted over the years as I have moved between different social and cultural settings. I was able to see reflections of these personal changes in the piece itself. I felt as if the dancers were representative of my experiences and journeys as a young artist and adult. As I transitioned into college and further into graduate school, my deeper awareness and cleared understanding of my oppressed voice became more, vibrant, heard, and voiced. I noticed my work continued to have these reoccurring themes and I knew as I entered in my thesis work that this was the core of my research. I knew there was something connected with my understanding and growth of understanding my own identity that connected to the way I was interested in choreographing.

Within my choreographic process, I began to notice my dancers finding similar experiences within their own solos. These memories drove me to investigate and explore longer, more in-depth solos for each dancer. I have always been interested in watching one body on stage for an extended period and how that relationship with the audience and the dancer forms. I wanted each dancer to have more than a moment; I wanted them to have the time to express and honor their individual history, memories, and experiences.

At first, the rehearsals stayed relatively consistent in their structure: reflecting, creating, crafting, and showing. I wanted to establish a dialogue between the dancers and

myself to craft the solos together. I challenged myself to hold onto the honesty and integrity of the dancers' movements and inspiration, while maintaining the aesthetic I was interested in seeing on stage. How could I effectively integrate my voice in the process of creating? With my research being focused on keeping the voice and identity of the dancers within the choreographic process, I was interested in the role of my voice. I began to realize that if I allowed the dancers to be involved in the decision-making process, their voices would not be quieted by my own as the choreographer. I would spend time asking if the changes and recrafting still felt honest to what they were trying to say in their solos.

Using this process, the solos formed seamlessly. I was excited but concerned at the same time about how these solos would come together to form a piece. I had three beautiful solos, but no context to connect them. What was the through-line in this piece, and how would I introduce these solos? At this point in the process, I wanted to take a break from crafting the solos and create a section that included all three of the dancers together in unison. I wanted this trio to reach the same sense of attunement and connection we found in the solos. I was able to create a lengthy section that was fleshed out to be the final section of *My head, My hands*. I wanted this section to be fresh and new, yet reminiscent of each solo. I wanted to keep the dancers moving in the rigorous movement vocabulary, while integrating a more pedestrian feel. We started by creating walking patterns in connection to one another, symbolizing the role of the individual in the larger unit. I integrated my own material into these patterns, adding texture to the section. I felt satisfied with the section, and I knew how the piece should end. The dancers would slowly regress from unison into their own solos, eventually converging

upon one another at center stage. I wanted my audience and dancers to have a distinct experience during each section. In particular, the initial solos and their reappearance in the final section should be different, both in dynamic and performative qualities.

At this point in the process, I was able to find guidance and mentorship from my committee members by showing and discussing the current work I had began creating. I worked closely with three committee members who guided me in this process of decision-making and crafting. They provided a place for me as an artist to express, discuss, and brainstorm the creative process. It was essential in the process to have these three outside eyes that reaffirmed ideas and uncovered revelations. They helped me question and challenge my artistic process. With the helpful guidance and discussions, I was able to clarify and find a better understanding of how this piece would continue to grow. Entering the next rehearsal after meeting with my members, I gained an understanding on this piece. I was still uncertain on how it would begin, but my committee encouraged me to continue to follow my instincts.

I always knew the first section would not start out with a solo, but was unclear on where I would go from here. I began crafting a duet between soloist two and three that involved a fusion of text and movement. We started by colliding their “I am...” poems with the addition of descriptive words to evoke sensations.

“I am a gem lost and undiscovered,
I am the photo in the hallway,
I have been instructed to think traditionally outside of the box,
Becoming obediently wild.
We are awfully bewildered,
Happily cemented,
In our bitter hospitality.
I am an amazing attempt at being a soul searching,
Joy sucking,
Artistic Monster.”

This poem, written by two of my dancers, served as the impetus for the movement score. We worked on the delivery of lines and how movement within the text could change or alter what we say and how we say it. After months of trial and error, I was concerned the text would never work within the larger context of the piece. Part of what I enjoyed about the text was the idea of storytelling. The stories we tell are often a reflection of our current identities. I was interested in letting our stories be told, but did not expect to achieve the same result without words. Feeling defeated one day in rehearsal, I experimented with eliminating the verbal text. My committee also suggested that the delivery of the text felt out of place and I was interested in working it in different ways. I decided to still use the same initiations, timing, quality, and movement score of this section. This eliminated the text and provided a sense of serenity and attention to one's self and the relationship with one another. Without the words cluttering the space, the audience was able to see the dancers in who they are, what they stand for, and their relationships between one another.

The piece opened with a dimly lit stage. Three dancers stand with their backs towards the audience. The dancers are positioned on a strong diagonal as a deep droning sound fills the space. They begin moving subtly one by one until a dancer in deep maroon slowly begins moving towards center stage. As the dancer reaches the center, the trio begins moving in walking patterns that circle around and towards one another. Finally, the dancers cross paths to end up downstage in a line gazing out into the audience. They stand in stillness, looking out into the space before retreating upstage. They watch one another intently as they find their way across the stage. Two dancers connect in a duet as the other crouches to a low position, where she watches, moves, and reacts to the duet's

every move. The duet has the dancers falling, embracing, and manipulating one another. As the two dancers travel closer down stage, the music and lights begin to fade. We continue to see three soloists unique in their own quality, experience, and feel. The dancers finally meet as they come closely together sinking into one as the lights fade.

Through this chapter, I have described my choreographic process, along with visual representations of my creative graduate thesis work. I have discussed how my research on identity align with the creative process and provide a new approach to the creative process. I will now go on to discuss how the classroom and approach to education and educational standards can benefit from the awareness and understanding of identity.

CHAPTER V

MANIFESTING THE INDIVIDUAL

Arts education is a crucial step in connecting dancers and choreographers to their own identity. Through arts education, we are able to reach a mass amount of dancers at younger ages to begin cultivating this more trusted way of moving that I have discussed in previous chapters. Not only is this beneficial for future dancers and choreographers, but it serves an important purpose for all students to learn as they continue to develop to adulthood. I experienced this change in students while working in the Fall of 2014, at Bryant Middle School in Salt Lake City, Utah.

As part of my research, I spent 5 months teaching and mentoring students at Bryant Middle School 3 to 5 days a week. The project was in conjunction with Professor Juan Carlos Claudio through the Professor Off Campus Grant. The project aligned with my thesis research on identity, and allowed me to gain a better understanding about how identity can create a more trusted way of choreographing and performing. It allowed space for me to understand how this research crossed borders into education, which created a place for identity in the educational system. Through this process, I gained a deeper connection and understanding with students through projects that sourced from the student's past, history, memories, and stories. I watched students reveal more about

their own identity, which resulted in an approach to learning that was unique and new for both the students and myself.

Some of the processes and projects Professor Claudio and I created with the students were reminiscent of my own creative process. In creating *My head, My hands*, I was interested in leaving room for personal identity and artistic voice. While working in the classroom, I realized my research became something that was not just about the way I created, but also the way I can educate. I watched my students find a place that was accepting, empowering, and trustworthy of their personal history. Once discovering this newfound pride in their identity, they began to become open to new experiences and material.

Researchers discussed that students who are in the middle school education system are presented with many changes, both physical and mentally, as their bodies begin to mature into early adulthood. They believe that this “...combination of cognitive, social, and physical changes makes early adolescence a critical time for the consideration of self- and identity-related applications and interventions” (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002, p. 6). In knowing these changes, our students are in desperate need of an education that focuses on understanding one’s identity and how it manifests itself in the individual. As educators, we can create a space for this within our classrooms for these discoveries. The classrooms in both Salt Lake City and the United States in general often lack a place for the investigation of identity.

In *Understanding Early Adolescent Self and Identity*, Roesser and Leu discuss how, “schools can facilitate identity development by providing structure, supporting autonomy, and creating supportive relationships...” (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002, p. 11).

Roesser and Lau go on to discuss how most schools lack or “fall short in these regards.” I watched my students struggle with a lack of understanding and trust in their own identities. They lacked the ability to find empowerment from within.

Schools can facilitate identity development through similar projects. We allowed students to draw posters that helped them understand and discuss what traits and/or experiences made them special, unique, and powerful. We used poetry as a way for students to discuss what factors were part of their identities. Once students began to articulate ideas on their identity development, they were able to translate all of their findings into the art of dance and choreography. They created solos using a similar method as the dancers from *My head, My hands*. This process allowed for each student to embody their ideas on identity and express their understanding through other mediums. Students would leave the classroom with a sense of ownership and empowerment through their personal voices that was able to keep them grounded throughout the day. This ownership allowed room for the students to engage in different learning opportunities throughout the school day.

The ability to openly express and find voice within also creates the ability for students to find an understanding and acceptance of their peers. Middle School students often rely on peer acceptance and find a need for social acceptance to motivate and dictate their classroom participation (Wentzel, 1997). Social acceptance is a large part of education for Middle School students. Popularity, bullying, and inclusion are ways in which students experience school and learning. Giving the students an avenue to uncover a way for greater social acceptance can be great for identity development and enhance the students' experiences. Teaching students to find empowerment through differences can

often be easier to facilitate when it comes from a place of sharing. Questions about acceptance are one of the biggest obstacles we face in teaching this subject. However, once students are able to open up and recognize they are accepted, they are able to find empathy and understanding from one another. Finding acceptance for one another in the classroom can decrease truancy and the need to allow popularity to dictate the educational experience.

Identity development in education can be a way for educators to help students find a deeper awareness as they reflect on who they are within this world. It creates a place for students to begin thinking of how these factors can be empowering instead of degrading. My experience as a young adult left me feeling limited and confined to others' beliefs and identifying factors. I believe that if a teacher had given me such an opportunity to look at and investigate my beliefs and ideas, separately from the social constructs around me, I would have had a more successful educational experience. Would this approach to education have created room for the empowerment I yearned for? Could it have empowered me to engage more in homework, class discussions, and final projects? Unfortunately, I will not have that experience as a young adolescent student. However, I have learned in adulthood and can take a stance as an educator who enforces the importance of understanding oneself and investigating identity.

CHAPTER VI

I AM...

I am... a Female, Daughter, Lover, New Orleanian, Artist ...

All of these parts of my identity are apparent on a surface level. I have known that these parts of me exist, but it has been through the journey of graduate school and all of the investigation and research that has been inherent in that journey that I have been ~~am~~ able to engage with my evolving and re-forming identity in bodily and artistic ways. Through the exploration of my thesis questions, I have been able to better understand how my quest to understand and increase my awareness of my multifaceted and changing self-identity assisted in my growth and development as a performer, choreographer, and educator.

Over the course of the thesis process, I felt compelled to explore the changes I was going through on a personal level and that also seemed to be emerging, in parallel ways, in my creative process, my aesthetic sensibilities, my teaching philosophy, and my life. These changes were transformational and led me to my investigation not only my own identity but also the possibility of how, on a more general level, a deeper connection and awareness of our own identities might transform the experience we have on stage, in the choreographic process, and in the classroom.

My research in the studio, classroom, and in the literature led me to conclude that identity holds a role in all facets of our lives. As an artist, I discovered that choreographing from a place of deeper honoring of what feel like more authentic parts of myself led me to a profoundly more embodied way of moving and creating and also guided my way of working with my dancers. Approaching the choreographic process from a place of increased honesty resulted in a final product that felt more authentic to me. I began to trust this feeling of authenticity and that trust then created a new relationship and connection, a pride and sense of ownership to the material and piece. Keeping these ideas and values of identity core in the choreographic process and translating them to education mapped the way my students and me to find a new way of approaching teaching and learning in classrooms. Extrapolating from my research outcomes, I think it is possible that understanding and using the development of identity awareness with students can create new educational standards, and facilitate a way for educational practices to be more holistic and impactful.

Although I found a deeper connection to my identity and witnessed that deeper connection in my dancers and students to their own senses of who they are as humans, I believe it is impossible to fully comprehend or connect to one's identity in one specific way. This is the principal limitation to my research. It is difficult to acknowledge other limitations because the question I asked through my research never had a clear right or wrong answer. Rather than accuracy, this process focused on visceral feelings and instincts. Identity is constantly changing and morphing, and is something we may never fully comprehend due to its depth and complexity. It is the complex nature that makes the subject matter fascinating and intriguing to me.

The choreographers and artists I discussed in Chapter III such as Pina Bausch, Marie Chouinard, and Vincent Manstoe have explored certain facets of identity throughout their careers and lives and, in fact, it is probably true that all artists explore the question of who they are through their work. Still, one can continue to engage with self-discovery and reflection. Each exploration has the potential to yield new information, artistic avenues, and a more complete understanding of the body and all it contains, as a whole. When identity plays such a strong role in our lives and our experiences, and has such an impact on personal growth and development, I find it imperative to continue this research and I plan to pursue just that in my future as an artist and educator.

The choreographic process I explored is one that I intend on trying again in many different contexts. Much like identity, this process will morph and change with each iteration. No two processes will be the same, just as no two final products will be same. Each dancer/performer who I work with will bring a different identity to the creative process and I will change and morph as I enter each choreographic endeavor, thereby making each project unique as I continue on my journey. I now realize that it is this constant process of discovery that is what keeps the spirit of investigation and research alive.

The concept of identity has far-reaching implications that surpass the self in many ways. Identity is not only important to understanding the self, but it is the root of understanding the larger social, cultural, and political issues of our times. Since art often deals with addressing and making statements related to these life issues and in order to enact change, an understanding of identity, self and collective, can allow for artistic endeavors to have a more meaningful impact for us as humans.

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